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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Office of National Estimates

22 February 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT : Critical Aspects of the Arab-Israeli Situation

1. We continue to believe that Soviet arms support for the Arabs has substantially increased the chances of Arab-Israeli hostilities, in that: (a) Israel may risk or even initiate such hostilities while it still enjoys military superiority over the Arabs; and (b) the Arabs' growing military strength may increase their militancy and the explosive potential of border clashes and stimulate Arab readiness for a "second round." *

2. The purpose of this memorandum is to estimate which are the most dangerous aspects of the Arab-Israeli situation, and at what periods they are likely to be most critical. We do not attempt to quote odds on whether war will in fact break out.

THE ROLE OF THE GREAT POWERS

3. The US. Any estimate of this situation requires the caveat that both Israeli and Arab courses of action, now and

* SNIE 30-3-55, Probable Consequences of the Egyptian Arms Deal with the Soviet Bloc, 12 October 1955, Top Secret.

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for the foreseeable future, will be influenced to a considerable extent by the policies of the US and other Western powers, or by what the parties to the conflict consider such policies to be. We continue to believe, for example, that if both sides could be convinced that the US was prepared to use any means necessary to halt aggression, a "second round" would almost certainly not develop.

4. By the same token, recent US actions with respect to arms shipments to Saudi Arabia have almost certainly affected Arab and Israeli attitudes. While the Israelis may be disappointed by their failure to make the blocking of the Saudi tank shipment stick, they almost certainly believe that the episode has made it considerably harder for the US to refuse their urgent request for arms. They will make the strongest efforts in the next few weeks along these lines. The decision to stop the shipment almost certainly strengthened the belief of most Arabs that US sympathy for Israel as against the Arabs is a major consideration in US policy toward the Middle East. The subsequent reversal of this decision has probably not significantly affected this belief, though the Arabs have probably been encouraged by the unblocking of the Saudi arms shipment to believe that the US also remains highly vulnerable to Arab pressures, largely because of their belief in the West's long-term dependence on Arab oil.

5. Effects of US Arms to Israel. Virtually any shipment of US arms to Israel would entail adverse effects on the US position in the neighboring Arab states. Most US representatives in the area have stressed the danger of such US action, and the possibility that it might lead to a rupture of relations with the US and to greatly increased Arab cooperation with the Bloc. Certainly the first reactions of the Arab leaders in these states would be highly emotional. On balance, however, we believe that the nature and extent of the longer term adverse effects would depend to some degree on the circumstances involved including: (a) the quantity and nature of the materiel provided Israel; and (b) concomitant US actions and attitudes toward the Arab states including our attitude toward shipment of arms to them. Nasr and other Arab leaders probably already assume that the US is under great pressure to give at least some heed to Israeli arms requests. Should US arms aid to Israel be modest in amount, confined to weapons which could be considered primarily defensive, and be provided under such circumstances as to emphasize continuing US concern for Arab interests as well, we believe there is at least an even chance that a major crisis in US-Arab relations can be avoided.

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6. The Soviet Bloc. On balance, the USSR probably does not wish to see an outbreak of full scale war between Israel and the neighboring Arab states, since it probably wishes to avoid the risks of world war inherent in such a development and is probably convinced that the present situation offers ample opportunities for Communist exploitation. Continued Arab-Israeli tension and flare-ups short of war will provide the USSR with enhanced opportunities to court the Arab side, either through political support in the UN and elsewhere, or through arms and other material assistance. If the Western powers should seek to deter or prevent hostilities by declaring their determination to intervene, the USSR would probably charge them with "imperialist" designs on the sovereignty of the states involved, and would also renew demands that the USSR and the UN be included in any efforts to resolve the situation. Should an Arab-Israeli war break out, the USSR is almost certainly prepared to exploit such a development, by extending diplomatic and possibly materiel support to the Arab participants and through efforts to play a leading role in UN peacemaking moves.

CRITICAL PERIODS

7. The precise time at which the risk of major Arab-Israeli hostilities is likely to be greatest depends upon a number of undeterminable factors. As indicated above, the future actions of the great powers, including the US, will significantly affect the choice and execution of policy by Israel and the Arab states in the developing situation. Moreover, there remains a continuing possibility of tensions developing to the breaking point at any time.

8. However, generalizations can be made on the basis of the developing military situation. At present, Israel is capable of defeating all Arab forces deployed against it in the

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Palestine and Sinai areas. We have estimated that it will be at least late 1956 before Egypt's new Soviet ground equipment can effectively be used in unit operations. While an even longer period would be required for full and effective absorption of jet fighters and bombers, the Egyptian air force will probably be capable of mounting at least limited raids against Israeli population centers in the next few months. In these circumstances, we consider the following periods to be critical with respect to the dangers indicated.

9. Deliberate Initiation of Hostilities by Israel. There is no evidence to indicate that the Israeli government has decided to launch full-scale hostilities. Israel almost certainly considers that its cause will best be served by acquiring adequate armaments from the West or at least effective guarantees of the territorial status quo. Despite rising Arab apprehension of an early Israeli attack, we believe that Israel will tread softly so long as it has active hope of obtaining such support. At the same time, the Israelis will not lose sight of the fact that after the Arabs have acquired and absorbed Bloc arms, Arab military superiority will be substantial, and that the compulsion on the Arab governments to use this superiority will become difficult to resist. They are most immediately concerned about the Egyptian air threat.

10. If the Israelis were to lose hope of gaining Western arms or guarantees at a time when they still had military superiority, the situation would enter its crucial phase. Israel might then decide on "preventive action", in the belief that the West would be compelled to intervene and impose a solution, or out of a desperate decision to go it alone while there was still time. On the basis of military considerations, the temptation to take such action would be greatest during this

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coming spring and early summer. * Thereafter, the likelihood of such Israeli action would decline, since growing Arab military strength would make it an increasingly risky proposition for Israel.

11. Deliberate Initiation of Hostilities by the Arabs.

The Nasr regime will probably seek to avoid war with Israel, at least while the Soviet arms are being absorbed. Barring serious Israeli provocations, other Arab states will probably follow the same course. If thereafter the Arabs actually gain military superiority, the chances of Arab aggression would become serious. Whether or not they would actually launch a "second round" would depend on their assessment of how far the Western powers would go to preserve the status quo and of how much support they could expect from the USSR in event of hostilities.

12. Accidental Hostilities. In the meantime, both Israeli apprehension and Arab confidence will probably develop faster than actual changes in respective military capabilities take place. The border situation will continue to be dangerous, as both sides remain touchy about asserting their rights against real or fancied offenses, and unable or unwilling to halt frequent exchanges of fire. In these conditions, Arab harassments of Israel through infiltration, or a resumption of Israeli tactics of planned reprisal will continue to involve risks of full-scale war even though neither side may desire it.

* Both Egyptian and Jordanian estimates accord with this, the Arab Legion naming May as the critical month, while the Egyptians talk in terms of 1 March to 1 June as the likely period. [REDACTED] has also described the next few months as the most critical with respect to Israeli aggression.

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MAIN POTENTIAL TROUBLE SPOTS

13. Areas or issues where hostilities could erupt without either side desiring them or which could be used by either side as justification for the initiation of hostilities include:

(a) Banat Yacob. This is a critical spot, in view of Israel's avowed intention to proceed with diversion of the Jordan River in the Israeli-Syrian demilitarized zone if the Arabs fail to accept the Jordan Valley Development Plan. If Israeli resumption of the project were not deterred or quickly halted by UN or Western action, Syria would probably fire on the workmen, possibly provoking Israeli retaliation. Should hostilities develop, Egypt would probably support the Syrians. The Saudis would almost certainly encourage Arab resistance by extensive financial support and Jordan would probably become involved, and possibly Iraq and even Lebanon. While Israel has announced that it would not resume the project on the 1 March deadline, in order to allow further US efforts to secure Arab acceptance of the Jordan Valley scheme, it is not likely indefinitely to delay this project in view of its urgent desire to proceed with water development, its claim that the project is justified by Israeli acceptance of the Johnston plan, and the question of prestige now involved in this issue.

(b) The Gulf of Aqaba. Premier Ben-Gurion has voiced his determination to end the Egyptian blockade of Elath by military means if necessary. While he has not talked publicly in these terms for several months, the possibility of such military action remains, either as part of an Israeli policy designed to keep up pressure on the Arabs or to obtain the long term advantages of the port of Elath. Israel would seek to justify its action by citing Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping in the Suez Canal as the initial provocation.

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(c) The El Auja Zone. Although incidents in this area have largely ceased in recent weeks, continued proximity of Egyptian and Israeli forces there, and the failure of both sides to implement (after accepting) UNTSO proposals to lessen local tensions, make this a potential scene of further border clashes and reprisal raids.

(d) The Gaza Strip. This area continues to be both the scene of sporadic exchanges of fire, and a source of harassments of Israel by refugee elements, inviting Israeli reprisals.

(e) The Jordanian Border. The armistice line, which divides many villages from their former wells and fields, has in the past been the scene of many incidents, some serious. Forays across this border have lately been less frequent, but tensions within Jordan, increasing Saudi activity there, and waning British influence create an inflammatory situation.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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SHERMAN KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates

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